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David Dillard-Wright

University of South Carolina - Aiken, [davidd@usca.edu](mailto:davidd@usca.edu)

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# The Third Covenant: People, Animals, and Land in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures

David Dillard-Wright

University of South Carolina, Aiken

The Hebrew covenant unfolds along three trajectories, what can be called three "covenants" or three "aspects" of the divine plan for creation.<sup>[1]</sup> These covenants are not separate, but represent different, non-sequential aspects of the same unfolding of sacred history. Envisioned as a triangle, one point would be Abraham and his line, the second point would be the Nations, and the third point would be the land and the animals, all bound together in ties of mutuality. The lines connecting the dots would be the proper sets of relations among these three covenant-bearers, and it is the proper ethical and spiritual relations that can be termed "the Kingdom of God" in Christian parlance. God is the "between" that links Jews, Nations, and Earth,<sup>[2]</sup> that connects the various choicings in a common vision of reciprocity, kinship, and peace. How do the three covenants inhere within one another? I address this question by taking cues from scripture in order to articulate a more profound respect for earth and its creatures.

Hebrew scripture tells the story of covenant: a *constant, unending renewal* of the relationship between God and the descendants of Abraham.<sup>[3]</sup> The chosen people tend to forget their special relationship with Yahweh. Patriarchs, judges, kings, and prophets must continually remind the people of their cultic and ethical duties, otherwise they begin to worship other gods and cheat the weakest members of society. Covenant requires regeneration: each generation must consciously remember, lest the people lose their identity and let their traditions die.<sup>[4]</sup> A second feature of covenant lies in its ever-expanding nature. The Hebrew covenant, from its beginning with Abraham (or Adam or Noah), promised expansion, and represents a spiritual and material path to prosperity for an embattled people. Hence the oft-repeated formula, "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted" (Gen. 13.16). This promise of progeny goes with the promise of land, since a large family requires a lot of room: "Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you" (Gen. 13.17). These lines begin what I will call the first covenant, the covenant with the descendents of Abraham, which will later be identified with the successive developments of the Mosaic law, Temple worship, and eventually, synagogue worship. The people promise to do the will of God, and God promises an abundance of offspring and land. In each iteration of the covenant, for the covenant must be re-iterated, an outward impulse persists.

This brings us to the second covenant, the covenant with the nations. Even before the advent of Christianity, there is a sense in which the whole world is blessed through Israel. The nations have an ambiguous status in the Hebrew scriptures: they tempt Israel with foreign ways and foreign wives, and yet they are approved when they offer help or chastisement to the holy people. The Deuteronomic ideal of a total separation from "the nations" never appears to come into force. Intermarriage may be taboo, but it also drives the Abrahamic/Davidic line forward. Affirmations such as the following occur throughout the Hebrew Bible:

O Lord, God of our ancestors, are you not God in heaven? Do you not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations? (2 Chr. 20.6a)

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations. (Ps. 22:27-28)

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. (Selah) (Ps. 67:4).

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it (Isa. 2:2).

These passages, among many others, illustrate what I call the "second covenant," the covenant with the nations. The sacred circle expands with this covenant: now all people have access to the first covenant through Israel. The other nations participate with Israel in relationship to the divine when they recognize the mighty acts that Yahweh has done or when they become instruments of Yahweh's will.

Here, a paradox asserts itself. The nations represent a great temptation to Israel, since the chosen people may stray from the law to serve other gods and may lose their identity in the midst of the diverse practices of the Ancient Near East. At the same time, the nations show forth the glory of God, because Israel must have an audience, a foil against which to demonstrate its special status. And yet, the other nations are not merely the backdrop for salvation history: they actually participate in that history's unfolding. Isaiah even imagines the nations streaming to Mount Zion, in other words, being incorporated into the covenant. In a well-known example, "second" Isaiah refers to Cyrus the Persian as an anointed one, because he allows the Babylonian exiles to return to the holy land (Isa. 44-45). So, even before Christianity and Islam, Israelite religion already has the sense that the whole world will be blessed in Zion, that the covenant extends to those who further it. Of course, with the other "religions of the Book," the Abrahamic covenant spreads to every part of the globe, and the Jewish

diaspora also eventually rings the planet. The people reckoning their spiritual ancestry as beginning with the Abrahamic line steadily increase, reaching into the billions today.

So, the impulse of the covenant reaches ever outward, beginning with the patriarchs, extending into Mosaic law and temple worship, and gradually coming to reach all the nations of the earth. With the first two covenants, the whole of humankind is invited into communion with divine reality. But the covenant always reaches outward, renewing itself in each generation. It would seem, then, that the story would be over with the inclusion of the nations and that all of the growing room has been exhausted. But here, the third covenant enters into the picture, a third covenant that has special importance for the Abrahamic faiths, for the relationship of these faiths to New Age, indigenous, and Pagan religions, and, most importantly, for re-envisioning attitudes towards earth and the land.

The third covenant is announced in many places in the Hebrew scriptures: for instance, in the laws governing the humane slaughter of cattle and responsible agricultural practices, in the theophanies that take place through nature, in the Garden of Eden story, and in the Noah narrative. The Noahic covenant bears further mention. The story of Noah's flood follows soon after the two creation stories and the expulsion from the Garden. Noah's father, Lamech, prophesies about his son, "This one will provide us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands, out of the very soil which the LORD placed under a curse" (Gen. 5.29, JPS). Remember that tilling the ground by hand was one of the curses that God placed on humanity after the expulsion from the garden, so Lamech prophesies that his son will remove the curse laid on previous generations. Another curse laid upon human beings was alienation from the animals. God says of the serpent, "They shall strike at your head, and you shall strike at their heel" (Gen. 3.15). I take the serpent to be emblematic of all animals: enmity between humans and other creatures begins with the Fall. It should come as no surprise, then, that the removal of the curse involves close quarters between humans and other creatures in the familiar story of Noah and the ark. Renewing the covenant means repairing the lost relationship between humanity and other creatures, acknowledging a shared destiny with them. The central term in the story, "flesh," refers not only to human beings, but to anything having the "breath of life" (6.17). Here the covenant explicitly applies to all animals, including but not limited to human beings. The story even mysteriously says that "all flesh had corrupted its ways on earth," without saying what that corruption meant (6.12). The loss of communion between humans and other creatures apparently involves some sort of tragedy for the other animals as well. By following Noah into the ark, trusting him in some sense, they affirm the binds that tie all lives together, making a future for life on earth possible.

Doubtless, there are some troubling aspects to this story. The other animals still must subordinate themselves to Noah in order to survive: they can be saved only by entering into Noah's caretaking. Noah serves as some kind of curator of living things, preserving one pairing of each kind of animal. These heterosexual pairings ignore the larger kinship units that the animals might have had and domesticate them into the space of human artifice. The floating menagerie, unmoored, as it were, from the land, from the habitat, erases any sense of connection between creatures and their surroundings. The trope of the ark no doubt serves as the inspiration for many projects of techno-scientific salvation that delude human beings into thinking that they, like Noah, can divert any catastrophe through inspired artifice. This is to say nothing of the catastrophic violence itself, in which many living beings perish as a result of divine wrath. Even though this story is often told as a children's story, it is, perhaps, the most violent in all of the Hebrew scriptures. But for all of its death and destruction, the story still acknowledges a kinship between humans and other creatures, and a common vulnerability and dependence. The dove that returns to Noah's hand with a sprig of olive in its beak (8.11) has become a symbol of peace, and its interspecies and environmental aspects are notable. Here bird, human, plant, and landscape coalesce into a single symbol. The story says that peace happens when humans acknowledge their common cause with the rest of the created order. It should also be noted that Noah does not act alone: every detail of the ark's construction comes as a divine revelation. Noah does not save the earth through his own ingenuity, but through obedience to the divine plan. And, afterwards, God establishes a covenant not only with Noah and his family but with the animals as well (9.10).

The third covenant perhaps most explicitly appears in the book of Hosea, in a passage that I regard as the fulcrum of all of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, the unifying point of the divine plan:

I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. (Hos. 2.18-19)

The courtship and marital references here point to a "consummation" of the covenant, and that consummation only happens when the earth itself and all the animals bear the covenant (I take this consummation to be synonymous with the Parousia, or the second coming of Christ, in the Christian tradition). Note here that the animals do not bear the covenant indirectly through a human mediator: they occupy the position of the chosen, or, in Christian parlance, the Elect. Peace comes when people submit to this third covenant, when they put down the instruments of war and recognize the animals and earth as sacred. This passage reverses the curses in Genesis: Adam and

Eve were cast out of the garden and alienated from the other creatures, but here, Israel returns to a union with animals and the wilderness. The wilderness is not a place of chastisement in this passage, since it contains vineyards and is referred to as a "door of hope" (2.15). It is not a "pure" wilderness but is something of a hybrid, a garden or a cultivated wild.

The significance of this third covenant becomes clear when each of the three covenants are analyzed in turn. The first covenant placed demands on the ancient Israelites and also yielded certain blessings. They would have to repent of their old ways and live under Yahweh's direction, eventually codified in the law. They would claim the name of Yahweh and therefore inherit the power of that name. The stringencies incumbent upon those claiming the name of Yahweh entered into every aspect of daily life, as the Levitical laws demonstrate. The second covenant also demanded a certain change on the part of the beneficiaries of that covenant. The nations are blessed when they fear the God of Israel, that is, when they recognize the power of God in the chosen people and work to the benefit of Israel. In some cases, this involved adoption into the nation of Israel, or what we might call "conversion" today. In the Christian and Muslim versions of the second covenant, demands are also made of the beneficiaries of the covenant. In both faiths, the believer must renounce his or her old ways and live by faith. For Muslims, this "submission" means fulfilling the Five Pillars of confession, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage. Christians, likewise, must repent and submit their lives to God, which should result in many of the same outward signs. The Jews, meanwhile, have had to adjust themselves to a broader covenant, and the scriptures tell the story of a holy people living in the midst of strange "others" who alternately admire and persecute their faith. Kindness and hospitality towards the stranger, even the oppressive foreign nation, has become the hallmark of prophetic witness through the ages. God's saving work often takes the form of reconciliation in the midst of difference.

The third covenant is no less demanding than the two that came before. Repentance, in this case, means renouncing the Fall that took Adam and Eve out of the Garden. It means turning from human self-reliance to a re-incorporation into the extra-human world. It means acknowledging that the covenant now rests on the animals and on the earth that gives them life. The "door of hope" for humanity lies in deep humility: self-consciously stepping down from the throne at the pinnacle of creation and becoming servants of the other life forms on the planet. The trouble with Jewish and Christian attitudes towards the environment and animals has been an unwillingness to really question human dominion over the earth. Dominance over the animals comes as a result of the Fall, and it is this very dominance that has to be reversed if the covenant is to be fulfilled. Cast out of the garden, humans work by the sweat of their brow, they over-rely on the products of their own hands, idols that cannot save, and they unleash



untold suffering and war. Equilibrium can only be restored to the earth when humans return to the wilderness or the garden. This may sound like an unrealistic goal, a romantic pipe dream, but it can be done. Humans return to the garden by planting it, by choosing to order their societies in cooperation with earth and other creatures. This would not involve a return to wildness, but a creation of a new form of cultivation, a cultured wild, a garden. The curses of the book of Genesis will only be lifted when people take it upon themselves to renounce domination and return to Eden. This can happen when "will and grace are conjoined," when human effort meets with the grace to move beyond past habits and enter into more just relations with other species.<sup>[5]</sup>

The epoch of human dominance now wanes, and human beings can choose the manner of its closure. The command to "have dominion" over the earth and the command to "be fruitful and multiply" have both been fulfilled, *finished*, and these commands are no longer in place (Gen. 1.26, 28). Indeed, these commands applied only to nascent humanity and are not eternal absolutes. After all, God also told the animals of every kind to "be fruitful and multiply" (1.22). For many species on the earth, the command to multiply is, as yet, unfinished, since their very survival has been severely threatened by human beings. Now, for "those who have ears to hear," a new command, a new covenant comes into force. The animals and the earth itself bear the covenant: these non-human others now show forth the divine plan, now bear the image of God. The heavens proclaim the glory of God, and the earth his handiwork. The place of human beings in this epoch is to listen to this Word as it manifests itself in creation and to place themselves at its disposal, rather than the other way around. Technology has a place in this vision, but its role is to devolve the trappings of civilization, to make human presence less obtrusive. In order to be faithful to this covenant, humans must no longer treat themselves as more valuable than other species, as somehow deserving of the earth's "resources."<sup>[6]</sup> The language of "stewardship," when placed in the cultural context of free market capitalism, fails, because it simply lends a spiritual air to the commodification and exploitation of forests, rivers, mountains, and oceans, along with the creatures that live in these places.

Here, a few words of rapprochement between Abrahamic and earth-centered (neo-pagan and indigenous) religions are in order. Just as God ordered Abraham to "Take off your shoes, for the land on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exod. 3.5), people from diverse traditions who recognize the divine in the earthly can work together in service of the new covenant. Such a recognition does not mean simply that animals should be protected or that "resources" should be conserved. It means these things, but it also means something much stronger, that the earth is the "divine milieu," in de Chardin's phrase - that the earth is the divine dwelling-place, and is therefore divine, holy.<sup>[7]</sup> I will not get into metaphysical controversies about

pantheism versus panentheism versus animism, etc.: it suffices to say that those who recognize the divine in nature share a common cause. Even those who are uncomfortable altogether with theological language can still participate in the covenant through a respect or regard for the non-human world. This change in perspective does not amount to a kind of "special interest" theology, as though only some Christians, Jews, Muslims, and pagans were called to this ecological and pro-animal covenant. The third covenant that I am suggesting has already arrived, is already in place, bears on reality itself and cannot be opted "for" or "against." Indeed, this new reality confronts human beings at every turn, suggesting either a new way of living or a reckoning with the consequences of doing otherwise. I also do not want to merely "extend" the covenant to include non-human animals. The third covenant marks a radical *de-centering of anthropocentrism* in the interpretation of scripture and the envisioning of the divine, such that non-human nature now assumes ethical and sacramental importance. The image of God *does not refer only or even primarily to human beings* and refers to a special insight that happens when creation is viewed with the eyes of faith.

Saint Paul, in his letter to the Romans, imagines the connection between the new Christian converts and their more traditional Jewish brothers and sisters as follows:

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin...But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. (Rom. 11.1, 17-21)

Saint Paul gives a stern warning to the early church against the spiritual pride of thinking themselves superior to the Jews and hastens to add that the original covenant has not been set aside. At the same time, he tells his audience in Rome to remember that they have been added to the covenant through grace and not through any special merit. A similar moment now dawns upon the church today, and if Saint Paul were alive, he might issue a similar warning. Although humans are made in the image of God, they should not take that to mean that the divine reality somehow needs human beings or any particular religious tradition in order to reflect the divine glory. The chosen, privileged status of human beings comes to an end in the complete lack of responsibility that has characterized human relationships with the earth and other creatures. God now puts a knife to the dead wood of the church and grafts a new branch onto the roots of the Hebrew covenant, a new covenant founded on non-human



life, which now bears privileged status. This ancient and new covenant calls upon people of faith to accept its reality, which is already in force, and act accordingly. A living branch—a vital church, mosque, synagogue, or coven—can now be defined as a community of individuals that recognizes the divine in all of nature and allows that sense of the sacred to permeate worship and action. A dead branch can be defined as a community that insists on the ecocidal privilege of human interests above all else and works to undermine the livability of earth for future generations of all species. Faith in this context means a new way of seeing, a new way of listening to inanimate and animal nature, a willingness to attend to the divine Other in all of its forms (leaf, caterpillar, cat, mushroom, stone, dirt, earthworm, frog, etc.). Faith also means attending to each individual moment and each other being as an absolutely unique and irreplaceable bearer of the divine likeness. Faith means not simply clinging to this new vision but mobilizing it in the world, cultivating a new garden, a new interspecies community not bound to the old divisions that have led to the current unsustainable global situation.

In the old paradigm of "stewardship" or "creation care," human beings placed themselves at the locus of control, made themselves the arbiters of right. These anemic concepts of concern about the earth and animals<sup>[8]</sup> clearly show their inadequacy in the face of the mass extinctions and climate crisis that characterize our current reality. The third covenant begins with a recognition that humans have utterly failed in their responsibility to care for the earth. Just as twelve-step programs begin with a recognition of the problem and attempts to make restitution for past wrongs, humanity must now recognize its profound failure to care for earth and its creatures. The covenant has been broken, again, and needs to be reinstated through repentance. Once the depth of the problem has been recognized, a new way of life must begin, a way of life that de-centers human privilege and sees *all things as bearers of the divine image*.

Responsibility in this context means eschewing the destructive tendencies of the past, refusing to instrumentalize the non-human world to satisfy human desires. It means changing our ethical systems to no longer regard humans as the pinnacle of evolution or creation and to accept that sometimes non-human nature takes precedence over "civilization." It means re-planting the garden that we have destroyed and allowing other species to live out their own meanings and agencies. Human beings need to do more than just add animals and nature to the equation: we need to re-write the equation altogether, to make of ourselves a dependent variable. In reality, we have always depended on other species and ultimately on the earth itself: the time has come when we must recognize this reality or risk everything.

No doubt some will say that the position I am setting forth in this article represents a misanthropic, apocalyptic doctrine, one that perhaps verges on heresy for the

anthropocentric theologies of the past. I can only agree with these accusations, but I would hasten to add that it is impossible to go in a new direction without a decisive break from old habits. The danger that now confronts ecological thinking is a lukewarm accommodation or reform that does not change the fundamental assumptions that led to the current crisis. Jesus said that "Those who love their life in this world will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25). In order to live in a new reality, in a transfigured world, we must first hate the way things have always been, we must insist on thinking and living in a new way. We cannot put "new wine into old wineskins," nor can we take the wide path of convenience and tradition (Matt. 9:17, Mark 2:22, Luke 5:37). To borrow Nietzsche's phrase, a "revaluation of values" needs to take place, one that no longer privileges human utility above all else. An inversion or devolution must happen from within, a voluntary submission or humility that places non-human nature as having paramount importance, trumping some if not most human uses. To refuse to renew the covenant in this way is to revoke it, renouncing the divine intentions for the world and introducing human pride in its place.

The relationship between Israel and the nations was uneasy from the beginning: these nations came to represent the eventual triumph of Israel and yet also presented the gravest temptations. The third covenant also comes with some troubling tensions and paradoxes. Humankind, with the exception of indigenous peoples around the world, has come to think of itself as over and above the rest of creation. Even Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, often touted for their ecological stances, have typically regarded the human incarnation as the most spiritually advanced and the closest to *moksha* or *nirvana*. The third covenant radically undercuts this anthropocentrism, because it asks people to find their special status in a renunciation of any special status, a humility beyond humility. Just as Jesus placed himself below the disciples as a servant, washing their feet, humankind must now place itself below the other creatures on the planet, making the world more livable for them. The third covenant asks humankind to rejoin the rest of nature, to give up the bad habit of exceptionalist thinking, to regard nothing as inferior or inadequate. Instead of relying on the works of their own hands, this covenant calls for humankind to find security and comfort in the community of other beings. The sooner we recognize this paradigm and incorporate ourselves into it, the better chance the world has for a better tomorrow. To borrow a phrase from Romans, "the whole creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God," and never has the earth groaned more loudly for its liberation (8:19, 22).

## Notes

[1] Speaking of a divine "plan" is shorthand for the "lure" of God working within, and not above, creation. Here I am thinking broadly of process theology, which creatively maintains doctrinal theism in an evolutionary framework.

[1] The term "earth" certainly means something much different to our contemporary world than it meant to ancient Israelites. We think of the satellite photos of earth, a blue, whirling globe, upheld by forces such as gravitation and the laws of motion. Ancient Israel was probably much closer to an animistic view of the world in which negotiations with higher powers maintained the natural order. Political and ecological relations were not incidental to divine/human interactions and were important vectors for the sacred. The narrative of Hebrew scripture speaks to us today because of its refusal to compartmentalize the natural and the supernatural, the natural and the cultural, etc.

[1] The covenant does resemble legal contracts in a formal sense, but to simply conflate the notion of "contract" with "covenant" would diminish its meaning. The covenant binds together Israel with Israel's God, as the many marriage passages in scripture attest. Hosea 11.4 comes to mind: "I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love." These "bands of love" tie together land with its inhabitants (human, non-human, inanimate, numinous), in networks of reciprocal relationship.

[1] Or sometimes quite literally die. The land, people, animals, and God are all bound together in scripture. Hence, a refusal to obey Yahweh could result in famine or plague. The divine judgment on Egypt included not only punishments on the Egyptians themselves but also negative effects on their natural world and the deaths of their livestock (Exodus 7-12). In the same way, the prosperity of the Israelites' own crops and flocks depended upon fidelity to divine law. Jeremiah relates that disobedience leads to a desolation in the land (see Jer. 9:10-14; 5:22-28; 18:14-17; 47:2-3). I am grateful to Jacob Goodson and Laura Hartman for this observation.

[1] See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), p. 58. And by "humans," I mean primarily the members of "advanced" industrialized nations who have caused most of the devastation to earth and, hence, bear most of the responsibility for its restoration.

[1] See de Chardin, Pierre Teilhard. *The Divine Milieu*. Translated by Siôn Cowell. (Brighton, Great Britain: Sussex Academic, 2004 [c. 1957]). I agree with de Chardin in seeing evolution as a divine unfolding, but question the supposition that humanity is the purpose or apex of this unfolding.

[1] I use the terms "earth" and "animals" together because the two must go together. Caring about animals requires caring about land and vice versa.

